

Contemporary Slave Labor and Subjectivity: Psychosocial Perspectives on the Enslaved's Narratives

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Abstract: This study addresses the relation between subjectivity and contemporary enslaved labor from the enslaved workers' narratives in Brazil. A qualitative social research was carried out based on a constructionist perspective. We sought interaction with rescued workers and used (a) participant observation of workers' routine in an institutional project that supports them and a field diary, (b) semi-structured and open individual interviews with workers and a member of the team project. The fieldwork lasted a year and a half and the analysis followed Content Analysis. Freudian theory and Foucault's thought were used for interpretation, which managed to understand aspects of workers' experiences, exploitation characteristics, parental abandonment, as well as the tensions in self-classification as enslaved. The narratives pointed to a dramatic reality manifested in body exploitation, authoritarian abuses, violence, and negligence. At the same time, these narratives showed forms of worker resistance that calls for further investigations to increase knowledge on the subjective experiences of those who were enslaved.

Keywords: Labour, Subjectivity, Psychosocial, Enslavement, Narration.

Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo e Subjetividade: Considerações Psicosociais sobre Narrativas de Escravizado(a)s

Resumo: O artigo aborda as relações entre subjetividade e trabalho escravo contemporâneo a partir da narrativa de trabalhadores(as) escravizados(as). Foi realizada uma pesquisa social qualitativa em uma perspectiva construcionista. Buscamos a interação com trabalhadores resgatados e realizamos a observação participante da rotina de trabalhadores atendidos em um projeto institucional, com diário de campo, e entrevistas individuais (semiestruturadas e abertas) com trabalhadores(as) e equipe do projeto institucional. O trabalho de campo durou um ano e meio, e a pesquisa foi realizada com o suporte da Análise de Conteúdo. Para a interpretação utilizamos aportes da teoria freudiana e do pensamento de Foucault, com os quais foi possível compreender aspectos das vivências dos trabalhadores, características da exploração, abandonos parentais e tensões em torno da autotransclassificação como "escravo". As narrativas apontaram uma realidade dramática manifesta na exploração do corpo, em abusos autoritários, na violência e negligência. Ao mesmo tempo, as narrativas evidenciaram formas de resistência dos trabalhadores que convocam mais investigações para adensar o conhecimento sobre as experiências subjetivas desses que estão num lugar de escravizado(a).

Palavras-Chave: Trabalho, Subjetividade, Psicosocial, Escravização, Narração.

Trabajo Esclavo Contemporáneo y Subjetividad: Consideraciones Psicosociales sobre Narrativas de Personas Esclavizadas

Resumen: Este artículo aborda la relación entre la subjetividad y el trabajo esclavo contemporáneo desde la narrativa de trabajadores esclavizados. Se realizó una investigación social cualitativa desde una perspectiva construccionista. Buscamos la interacción con los trabajadores liberados y utilizamos la observación participante de la rutina de los trabajadores atendidos en un proyecto institucional, diario de campo y entrevistas individuales (semiestructuradas y abiertas) con trabajadores y miembros del equipo del proyecto institucional. El trabajo de campo duró un año y medio, y se utilizó como apoyo el análisis de contenido. Para la interpretación se utilizaron aportes de la teoría freudiana y el pensamiento de Foucault, con lo que fue posible comprender aspectos de las vivencias de los trabajadores, características del escenario de explotación, abandono parental y las tensiones relacionadas con la autclasificación “esclavo”. Las narrativas apuntan a una realidad dramática manifestada en la explotación del cuerpo, abuso autoritario, violencia y abandono. Al mismo tiempo, evidenciaron formas de resistencia por parte de los trabajadores, que reclaman más investigaciones para profundizar en el conocimiento sobre las vivencias subjetivas de quienes se encuentran en esclavitud.

Palabras clave: Trabajo, Subjetividad, Psicosocial, Esclavización, Narración.

Introduction

Capitalism, colonialism and the patriarchy have been the main forms of domination since the 17th century (Santos, 2020) and are deeply rooted in the contemporary culture and subjectivity of Brazilian society, marked by 400 years of enslavement of Black men and women and colonization of Indigenous people throughout the capitalist exploitation of land, water, and human beings. This is evidenced when approaching contemporary slave labor (CSL). In this paper, we present critical reflections on subjective aspects, developed from contact with people who have been subjugated to this form of exploitation. We dwell on revelations that occurred during meetings with former workers in CSL, against the backdrop of an institutional project that aims to offer support to the social reinsertion of vulnerable workers rescued from CSL, the Integrated Action Project (IAP).

This project is an inter-institutional action, a pioneering Brazilian initiative created in 2009 in the state of Mato Grosso to fill gaps in policies and practices to combat CSL, offering care and support to victims to prevent re-enslavement and provide technical and professional qualification, literacy opportunities, and further education (Costa, 2021).

Knowledge of the dynamics, bonds, relationships at play and experiences of workers in contexts of slavery-emancipation is essential to deepen the debate on the subjective aspects of CSL relationships and to improve actions of attention, recovery, assistance, and social support for people subjected to domination and objectification by CSL. Paying attention to this dimension by listening to the singularity in the narratives of those who were enslaved has proven to be an important source of contemporary anti-slavery struggle around the world (Nicholson, Dang & Trodd, 2018). At the same time, it gains special relevance by recognizing the experiences of people in situations of subalternity and valuing their narratives, which are full of resonance of violence in the family and society, nostalgia and loss (Beneduce, 2016). It also contributes to overcoming gaps in Brazil's rich tradition of scientific knowledge on CSL, which has focused mainly on other social actors involved in the struggle, particularly the judiciary, labor inspectors, and social movements (Silva, 2016; Ribeiro & Leão, 2020). Several studies in Brazil have already addressed the point of view of enslaved subjects (Figueira, 2004; Costa, 2008), but the uniqueness of the present contribution is due to the specificity of the population addressed, which is inserted in a pioneering institutional intervention

process in Brazil, with the prospect of opening up paths for future developments in psychosocial care for these workers.

It is worth noting that in Brazil, despite the fact that more than 54,000 workers have been freed from CSL in recent years (Observatório Digital do Trabalho Escravo no Brasil [OBECSL], 2019), there is a lack of consolidated practices, policy guidelines and experiences of listening to, caring for and assisting these workers. Despite the diversity of theoretical approaches in the subjectivity-work field, there is a shortage of initiatives to understand-intervene in the effects on the subjects or, more generally, in the psychological and social consequences of these extreme forms of expropriation and labor exploitation. Furthermore, the experiences of the Integrated Action Project for the social reintegration of these workers have not yet been universally implemented and do not constitute a national model of care (Costa, 2021).

The lack of care in practices and a certain inattention from the academic world show a negligence towards this class of workers marked by poverty and historical exclusion, limiting their access to education, literacy, income, housing, etc. These material conditions also put these workers at greater risk in the face of this reality, one of the most serious situations of violation of rights in the contemporary world of labor.

This reality indicates that contemporary society reproduces historical mistakes and re-enacts oppression, due to the fact that the enslaved population in Brazil after the Golden Law of 1888 was equally neglected, and no historical reparations were directed towards overcoming socio-cultural barriers and structural racism (Mattos, 2005).

For this reason, and following Patterson (1982) we consider that the conditions of slavery – colonial or contemporary – always involve a logic of denial of the worker's human condition. The enslaved are commonly seen as people without citizenship, honor, or tradition and therefore socially dead, not because they are objects of property, but because they could not be subjects of and with property. In fact, if they are seen as people without citizenship, honor, or tradition, they are neither considered nor treated as people. They are lives captured in a sphere of power (the company that exploits slave labor) for which the validity of the legal order is suspended. Slavery is defined precisely as the violence of domination that generates dishonor

for the enslaved, alienating them both in their existence and in their rights (Patterson, 1982).

According to Giorgio Agamben's (2007) strategy of thought, CSL can be characterized as a criminal modality, but this does not prevent it from being a fact outside the political and social sphere of the production of bare lives. Similar to the field – the *Lager*, in Agamben's words – the field of CSL makes up a part of the national territory that is installed and sustained outside the juridical-political order, of which labor regulations are a part. This geopolitical territory is the materialization of the power of exception, conditioned and made possible by the non-application of the law. The law, when not applied, allows the production of body-gears at the service of the productive chain of capital without the mediation of a symbolic apparatus that relativizes the rawness of this absolute power and sustains the distinction between biological life and person.

The lack of distinction between biological life and person sustained by the sovereign power of exception, which governs CSL, certainly produces notable effects on subjectivity (Chehab & Freitas, 2015). Not least, it is emphasized that legalized slavery produced sociocultural and psychological repercussions, especially in African-American populations (Du Bois, 2007; Eyerman, 2001). The international literature shows that the narratives of victims of CSL are filled with disregard for the well-being of the worker and report trauma and manifestation of physical and psychological suffering involving fears, panic, (Nicholson, et al, 2018; Turnermoss, Zimmerman, Howard & Oram, 2013; Bales, 2007), psychological dependence, and infantilization – comparable to the Stockholm Syndrome (Elkings, 1959, Huddleston-Mattai & Mattai, 1993) – since the cycles of oppression of slave relationships leave marks that affect the conception of self-worth, relationships, and personal projects (Degruy, 2005).

In the case of Brazil, the roots and heritage of slavery, based on various socio-cultural scenarios, are historical and psychosocial marks of the formation of a society that generates exclusion and the production of subordinate people (Jesus, 2012). For this reason, it is not uncommon to come across discourses that tend to naturalize CSL because it affects the poorest, most vulnerable and historically excluded populations (Jesus, 2012).

Currently, this discourse is coated with assumptions of meritocracy allied to the strong

political and financial interests of the neoliberal logic. Therefore, when analyzing complex situations such as CSL, it is essential to understand how cultural, political, economic, and subjective aspects are intertwined, as well as their roots in the lives of those who suffer its consequences. Shying away from this discussion weakens the proposition of solutions, because unveiling the links present in CSL sheds light on new possibilities for rupture and emancipation. For this reason, in this article, we characterize and problematize the type of slavery experienced, the affective bonds referred to and the dilemmas concerning the self-classification of workers.

Theoretical and methodological path

An exploratory social research was carried out with a qualitative approach in order to raise new questions and indicate aspects to be detailed and observed considering that CSL is an empirical field that has not yet been thoroughly explored in the scope of Psychology, Health, and Work. Health and subjectivity were not approached as isolated elements belonging to a solipsistic and uprooted subject, but as a socio-historical process mediated by labor and social relations of production, a process that is not neutral to health and subjectivity (Dang, 2009; Nicholson, et al, 2018; Turnermoss, Zimmerman, Howard & Oram, 2013).

A constructionist perspective was used, following the epistemology of freed slaves (Dang, 2019) in the sense of valuing the subjects' everyday life experiences as a knowledge-producing element. In other words, it was recognized that authority in this field belongs to the individual who have been subjected to CSL, admitting that the knowledge originating from their experiences is unique and differs from the knowledge about CSL produced by researchers interested in the topic (Dang, 2019).

To understand CSL from this point of view, attempts were made to interact with the freed workers, applying the following procedures to understand their realities in a way that was possible in the institutional context available: (a) participant observation of the workers' routines during the IAP training processes, using a field diary and (b) individual interviews (semi-structured and open-ended) with workers and a member of the IAP team. The fieldwork lasted a year and a half (from 2018 to 2019) and several meetings were held with the workers, as well as three interviews with a specific professional responsible for monitoring

and conducting the cases of IAP participants due to her extensive experience with rescued workers.

In this scenario, it was possible to produce and interpret a fragment of the reality and human experience with CSL based on interaction and shared moments, considering the IAP as a place for training-listening-speaking.

Despite the real limitations in terms of access to the workers and the opportunity to talk to them, it was possible to generate dialogic conditions in the interviews, which brought to light elements of the subjects' lore, originating in contexts of slavery.

To highlight and analyze these elements, the Content Analysis approach was chosen (Bardin, 1977) and the content collected was fully read. As in the pre-analysis, an attempt was made to group together the themes that emerged and recurred. To explore the material, the themes were organized into axes that resulted in the grouping of the following categories: labor process in slavery, relationships established in this context, and slave labor itself.

To interpret these thematic axes and process the results, the Brazilian concept of contemporary slave labor was employed, characterizing the slave labor process, the forms of work organization, and the related risks. The constitutive elements of CSL were the reference frame for interpreting how workers see themselves in a situation of slavery. For the interpretation of the other thematic axes, two references were used: (1) Freudian psychoanalysis, especially to discuss the elements of parental helplessness and the relationship with authority figures since family relationships and authority figures proved to be present in the narratives; and (2) aspects of Foucauldian ideas, in particular the notion of pastoral power, because it allowed the researchers to problematize their own interaction with the workers.

The research was approved by an academic ethics committee and the interviews only began after the subjects agreed to participate and signed the informed consent form.

Which slave labor? Workers and the characteristics of exploitation

We were able to interview 15 enslaved workers aged 22 to 35 years, 9 Black/mixed-race and 6 White, 11 men and 4 women. 11 were from the northeast region of Brazil and the others came from the countryside of the state of Mato Grosso. All of them had

been subjected to CSL at some point in their lives and were living in vulnerable situations at the time of the interviews. All the narratives denote experiences of CSL related to work on rural properties and a mixture of domestic work and sexual exploitation in the cases of the women.

The narratives present characteristics of the CSL process on rural properties, with very similar living and working conditions. In these realities, people were exposed to poor access to drinking water and hygiene, as well as terrible housing conditions that made it difficult to sleep and recover strength. These conditions were associated with long working hours per week, with no rest on weekends, working daily hours of over 12 hours, with a (dis)organization of work in which there were no markers to indicate the beginning and end of the working day, interspersed with meal breaks. The lodgings were improvised, made of canvas and with beds made in holes in the ground. The bathrooms were either non-existent or inadequate. The financial costs were borne by the workers themselves. The employers were not responsible for the minimum working conditions, leaving the workers with no option but to improvise and/or go into debt to pay them. The workers assumed the costs of the work (tools, hygiene items, sheets, food, etc.). The small amount they received turned into debt with the contractor, making it even more difficult for them to leave the workplace. The reports show exposure to health risks and cases of accidents at work without any assistance, care or sanitary conditions for recovery. The absence of medical assistance in the event of illness or accident, due to isolation or negligence, is one of the hallmarks of CSL.

Notably, most of the scenarios of slavery experiences took place in the agribusiness sector, due to the socio-productive reality of the state of Mato Grosso. In fact, the majority of worker rescues in Mato Grosso occur in labor processes linked to agribusiness, which is an economic activity responsible for a large part of the state's and Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to Bombardi (2017), agribusiness accounted for 74.7% of slavery cases from 2006 to 2016 at a national level.

Agricultural labor processes have been the material basis for the exploitation of slave labor since colonial times in Brazil, as shown by the peonage practices that are the engine of the Brazilian economy. The disappearance of the figure of the landowner

is remarkable, not because it has become extinct, but because its real presence is increasingly disguised and concealed by the discursive practices of agribusiness (Oliveira, Cabral, Azevedo, & Caetano 2018). Despite the masquerade or ideology of agribusiness, our research shows that the heart of the matter is the mindset and logic of latifundia, fed by the slave-like mode of exploitation of human labor and by environmental depredation, trying to hide behind the term agribusiness and its range of meanings (Bombardi, 2017; Costa, 2008).

Another notable aspect is that the experiences and characteristics of slavery reported are not homogeneous. However, although they vary from case to case, they all fall under Article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, as they do not provide the minimum conditions for the reproduction of the worker's physical and psychological health (Brasil, 2003), showing authoritarian, abusive intersubjective relationships, full of domination strategies and denial of the subjects' rights, dignity, and bodily integrity.

This brings us back to slave labor as extreme imposition, exposure, and coercion. In other words, it can be recognized that the body of workers subjected to CSL is more exposed to physical and mental harm due to the exhausting working hours and degrading conditions imposed without consent. This body that suffers damage at work becomes an abandoned body, excluded and replaced, without any guarantee of assistance. It is a body in a process of dehumanization, treated as a non-citizen, as a "thing" and not as a subject of rights (Leão, 2015; Oliveira, Cabral, Azevedo & Caetano, 2018).

Who did the enslavement and how was it done? Authority figures, parental helplessness, and violence

The enslavement surfacing from the narratives involved the acting-neglect of authority figures and forms of violence as a strategy of domination. In CSL, the operating logic is one in which the other is shamelessly abandoned, sold, and killed. Workers are not treated as people, but as useful bodies at the disposal of unlimited exploitation. The authority figures (parents or farm owners) regulate their actions towards the workers based on a utilitarian logic, in which violence and sovereign power over the other are noticeable. In all the narratives, the non-support of parents/family members and the mention of authority figures responsible for slavery stand out,

which reinforces McGrath's (2012) observation that CSL in Brazil involves paternalistic domination, mechanisms of dependency, and community ties, generally used to keep people in a "position" of subalternity (Mcgrath, 2012).

This position of subalternity would require further study to elucidate the psychic bases of this relationship with authority, which seems to rely on an infantile dimension that endures in the psychic life of human beings, as suggested by Freud (1933). In "The Dissection of the Psychological Personality," Freud discusses the formation of the superego, a psychic instance that regulates the morality of the "I." This psychic instance is supported by the external power that exercises authority over a child, subjecting them to this authority. It is worth highlighting, for our purposes, that this authority is maintained by way of the bond of obedience, which is generated and sustained by the child's fear of losing the love of the one on whom they depend on for survival. In this context, the bond of obedience seems to be the only alternative for survival for those who have been deprived of the freedom to manage their own lives.

In fact, the feeling of physical and emotional abandonment by parental figures pervades all the statements of the workers interviewed. These are workers who, since childhood, have been "left" on a rural property to be raised by a family member other than their parents. And, as we will see, they were raised to serve. This situation revealed the link between forms of domination, enslavement, child labor, and slavery in the workers' biographies.

Regarding his entry into CSL, one interviewee said that his mother sent him to live with an aunt on the farm when he was seven years old. There he worked a lot and earned nothing, barely having access to his own food and lodging, similar to the other farms where he worked. He suffered a lot at the hands his uncle, because he had to "do everything" and, while his cousins had a good life, he was treated with disdain, discrimination and violence: "they beat me with sticks, with whatever they thought was best" (Participant 1). When he reported this abuse to other family members, no one believed him, as his word was dismissed as madness, a term attributed to him: "you are crazy and whatever, you have a problem" (Participant 1). In other cases, the family used fear tactics, saying that staying there would protect them, because outside they would "become thugs,

become this, become that, it is better to stay here with us" (Participant 5). Under these conditions, there is also a loss of the sense of family ties: "she took me and gave me to an uncle, right? She said he was an uncle, right? Because only God knows what that guy was; and when he got there, he started enslaving me" (Participant 5). Those who enslave often play the role of "caregivers" and this is perhaps one of the biggest problems in the fight against CSL. The person who should give the child a sense of protection and care becomes a tyrant who crushes the development of the child's self-esteem, turning them into a frightened being: "I was afraid, I don't know, at the same time I was a bit scared, when I told my relatives they would laugh, saying I was lying" (Participant 1).

According to the utilitarian logic on which CSL is based, authority is exerted as pure power over the lives of those who they take in. However, is this power not the source from which, at our historical and cultural level, political and economic relationships are nourished, from which utilitarianism is held as the highest value? And is it not also this power that is beginning to affect family relationships, according Minerbo's analysis (2020), which links contemporary violence to the semantic emptying of the symbolic systems that organize life in society?

It is shocking to think that the human-to-human relational logic of contemporary slavery also regulates the liquid modernity described by Bauman (2001), in which the symbolic anchor of social institutions, including the family institution, is fluid, signaling the disintegration of the common ethical basis of civilized life. From this perspective, contemporary slavery would be the raw and undisguised face of what can happen at the macro-social level, when the symbolic places reserved for the figures of father, mother, and child are emptied of their semantic charge. One of the consequences of it is the loss of the affective charge of the meanings linked to the Oedipal signifiers (father, mother, son). Son does not seem to be a word that designates a symbolic place experienced and sustained by the family institution. The parents, as presented by the research participants, do not seem to have children, but bodies for the use of those who have them. From the perspective of the affective-representational constellation that surrounds the signifier child (care, protection, concern, etc.), the interviewees make it clear that they are not inscribed in a symbolic system of bonds in which "parents get to recognize themselves

by occupying the place of parents” (Minerbo, 2020, p. 171). Listening to them, we are struck by the fact that they are neither sons nor daughters. They are not people (in the relational sense of the term). They are mere bodies made available by their genitors and, if there are affections, they evoke an “utilitarian type of affections” (Minerbo, 2020, p. 173).

The issue of parental helplessness and abusive relationships within the scope of domestic work, present in all the narratives, reinforces what Ribeiro and Leão (2020) observed: CSL involves the weakening of family and social bonds, in addition to compromising the sense of belonging. In this sense, Schor (2016) proposes to research the psychic consequences of affective abandonment on children’s lives, specifically the distancing of the caregiver from the child when the latter is in a condition of helplessness and powerlessness. For the author, the effort of trying to help and/or recover the love of the parents leaves an abyss in the psyche, in which the child will develop sophisticated defenses against the loss of sense of self and the frequent threat, which may be of three orders: (a) no perception of a way out of the traumatic situation, so the subject becomes a sign of a reality without a beginning, middle, or end; (b) affective abandonment causes the phenomenon of self-alienation, due to the fact that, faced with intolerable suffering, one of the first tendencies of the psyche is to plunge into a process of trance; (c) the individual locates within themselves the origin of the violence that affects them, purifying their parents and family members. The massive disinvestment leaves its marks on the unconscious via psychological holes and, later on, the child will make immense efforts to try to revitalize their object of care, and the failures of this attempt leave deep marks on the subject’s narcissistic constitution.

The psychic consequences of parental abandonment and mistreatment by those who should support the child’s narcissistic constitution are shown in the report of one interviewee who talked about her low self-esteem, her fears and insecurities, and the aggressions of her violent ex-husband. The origin of her feelings of fear and insecurity was attributed to the fact that she started working as a child, when her family told her that she would work in a family home and, in return, they would teach her to take care of the house and read. The interviewee reported that in this house, the woman mistreated her a lot. For example,

whenever she ironed the children’s clothes, after finishing, the woman would throw everything on the floor so that she could iron properly.

The narratives of the women interviewed demonstrate other dimensions of the problem of CSL and are relevant because, in general, Brazilian research does not involve many cases of women. For example, from 2003 to 2018, of the 32,256 workers rescued, only 1,732 were women (Observatório Digital do Trabalho Escravo no Brasil [OBETEC], 2019). Internationally, on the other hand, it is estimated that 71% of the 40 million victims of slavery are women and girls (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017).

In the women’s reports, it can be seen that domestic work becomes an impediment to attending school by imposing the role of caregiver as the only recognized and valued place, because “school was a place for ‘vagrant’ women.”

The reported scenes of exploitation in domestic work point to strategies of domination of women that are clearly characterized as CSL and have historical roots in Brazilian colonial slavery. Currently, domestic slavery occurs in family, rural and urban environments, where female workers receive food, clothing, and housing at the workplace as payment (Villatore & Peron, 2014).

The different behaviors of those who were in the position of enslavers were also described as attempts to deceive the enslaved or to refuse to give them the opportunity to “get out” of the situation via education and learning. And even when the enslaved person refused to remain, threats and violence came into play, as one interviewee expressed: “if we spoke they beat us, they beat us really hard... they beat me, they tied me up” (Participant 1). In the escape attempts reported, disrespect from authorities and attempted murder were described. Thus, in addition to the most familiar figures, CSL situations are under the authoritarianism of landowners and businessmen, who are protected by politicians and corruption schemes sponsored by death squads. Souza & Junior, 2019; Figueira, 2004; and Bales, 2007 point out that cases of contemporary slavery in different places, such as India, Pakistan, Europe, and Brazil, always involve corruption and connivance of state authorities and bodies such as the police.

The process of liberation from CSL involves the struggle against corruption and emancipation from authority figures. After all, who else can these

workers turn to if those who should protect them act at the behest of those who commit the crime? How can they feel protected in telling others about what they have experienced? The influence of those who enslave goes far beyond political privileges; what sustains the fact that these modes of human exploitation are still allowed in many regions of Brazil is the irrefutable fact that the enslavers have power in these regions. The situation is complex because, as should be remembered, proximity to the recruiters is often a survival strategy for the enslaved in the face of the mechanisms of domination and control (Rocha, 2015). This brings us back to the violence in CSL contexts, manifested in various ways besides neglect and abandonment: threats, psychological abuse, and even physical aggression.

According to the professional at IAP, one of the workers was abandoned by her mother at an early age and lived in degrading and humiliating exploitative situations. All domestic and farming activities were her responsibility. There were seven people in the house where she lived, and she was considered one of the servants. During meals, these “servants” only ate if there was food left over, after everyone had finished. They experienced rape, humiliation, beatings, and sexual exploitation. The latter took place in a bar frequented by older men on “payday.” Due to the fact that the uncle had a lot of influence in the town, this situation occurred frequently, making a rescue more unlikely, added to the fact that even the local police knew what was happening. Even after the rescue, there was an expression of desire to return to the only place they knew: slavery.

In our view, some fragments of the workers’ narratives resemble accounts of domestic violence and Stockholm syndrome. Mandelbaum, Schraiber and D’Oliveira (2016), in their research on domestic violence, for example, show that in this sphere there is always an aggressor who claims to have all the power over the victim’s life and body and who usually embodies a father figure. Santos (2006) explains that the Stockholm Syndrome is a psychological state in which victims of kidnapping or who have their freedom deprived in some way develop a certain relationship with their tormenters. For Graham, Rawlings and Rigsby (1994), the following conditions are necessary for this syndrome to occur: the aggressor being able to carry out their threats and end the victim’s life; the impossibility of escape; feelings of

gratitude to the kidnapper in the face of situations and contexts of terror, such as the absence of violence or the non-execution of the kidnapped person; and isolation from the outside world. Graham et al. (1994) point out that, in some situations, it is also necessary to humanize the abductor and for there to be psychological closeness and affective interactions between the abductor and the abductee. In other words, the situations of CSL and the manifestations of violence present in the interviewees’ narratives encompass physical, affective, and psychological complexity, given that they witnessed modes of extreme violence: overexploitation and coercion; usurpation of working and living time; dilution/disruption of affective and family ties. These are bodies that, in addition to being exploited, are violated and abandoned by those who should take care of them.

Violence plays a central role in the preservation of relations of domination in slavery (Patterson, 1982). These are realities permeated by relations of power over the workers’ bodies. The issue of power in CSL contexts is a remarkable fact and can be analyzed from various angles: the political game that allows situations of exploitation and slavery to be perpetuated in the relationship between employer, enslaver, and worker; the tactics of those who enslave; the psychological aspect of the enslaved; among others.

Was I a slave? Strangeness and power relations in self-recognition in CSL

Even when the workers’ narratives allowed us to characterize their situations as CSL, we noticed that there was reluctance to grant interviews and difficulties for some workers during certain interviews to declare and/or name the lived experience as “slavery.” This indicates the density of this specific theme, so that many intersubjective elements still remain in the shadows, because our experiences with the workers showed that between the “experienced fact” and its nomination-classification as “slavery” there is a complexity that our listening did not allow us to reach, even more so in a situation that involves the figure and role of the researcher and the researched. We can build conjectures about the linguistic dynamics of the phenomenon of CSL and, to do so, we need to position ourselves from an onto-epistemological constructionist perspective, in which reality, or *what it is*, is itself the effect of language. From this perspective,

there is no non-linguistic presence of enslavement, so that saying/thinking about the thing is already signifying, and a thinkable meaning does nothing more than materialize that same thing. And this is, in linguistic translation, unbearable for those who have experienced the brutality of the thing, more or less isolated from living people who are not enslaved, unless this thing is meant/translated by the linguistic repertoire as something milder and more bearable. In this sense, what these research participants call into question is the possibility of separating reality from its representation, speaking not to describe a reality, but to present and experience it in the linguistic gesture. Therefore, there is no original presence that is not linguistic. As a consequence of this position, we are called upon to produce language and more language, discourse and more discourse in order to present the scandal of slavery every time we speak about it. In fact, within the IAP (the Project), the aim is to offer a social place for speech and discursive production that separates the “I” from the brutality of the thing that, from the outside, we call slavery.

We were struck by the worker who, despite not wanting to give an interview, began it by saying: “I was never a slave.” However, during his brief report, he mentioned important aspects that differentiate the “street professions,” which are better than the “bush” professions, because “staying in the bush” is tough, since one “loses a lot of things” (participant 4). This brings us back to the experience of enslavement as loss. Loss not only of the freedom to come and go, but of time, of family-affective relations, of bodily power (given the extreme risk and accelerated wear and tear), of the life project and appreciation of oneself as a subject of law and not merely a disposable object of extreme expropriation and exploitation (Patterson, 1982; Ribeiro & Leão, 2020).

Throughout this process, we wondered if the reticence to talk about CSL was related to some kind of pain that emerges at the moment of the narrative that (re)creates the signified experience of slavery. Our hypothesis is that the refusal to take part in the interview is not synonymous with denial of the situation of slavery. On the contrary, it may be an index of its recognition, but a recognition that evokes pain beyond the limits of what is bearable. Denying interviews and not wanting to talk much about the situation of CSL at the time of the interview are perhaps two different aspects. An experienced

member of the IAP team, who has been working with these workers for years, reported that most of the former workers assisted by the project went through a CSL situation many years ago and/or are still in a situation of vulnerability. However, those who were rescued more recently are less interested in talking about the situation.

Another angle to understand the refusal to take part in the interviews is the consideration that the presence of a researcher in front of the victims of CSL can promote a feeling of strangeness, as a kind of investigative authority, which would represent the direction towards a confession of having been enslaved. From this perspective, the refusal to take part in the interview or to talk about the enslavement during the interview would be a strategy of resistance to this power relationship, since speaking would mean submission.

We cannot deny that, in the relationships between the IAP team, the researchers and the workers, there are dynamics that can be configured as the exercise of pastoral power strategies, aimed at confessions (Foucault, 1999) of the subjective experiences of enslavement, in the face of which educational activities are initiated or reinforced with the aim of modifying the subject, shaping them for the formal labor market and changing their view of the self, so that they achieve the status of a subject of rights. In this institutional setting, it is not uncommon to witness the use of vocabulary related to “rescue” and “liberation,” which denote actions for the “salvation” of these workers. Following the Foucauldian view, saving this “herd” from CSL would require individualized surveillance and corresponding ethical-professionalizing exercises, capable of manufacturing a new worker, now no longer at risk of slavery, but equipped with technical-professional tools that would supposedly enable them to access the so-called “normal” exploitation of the formal labor market of capitalist social relations of production.

Oliveira (2018) discussed “psi practices” and “pastoral power” and their contribution to naturalizing servitude and maintaining pacified behaviors with discourses that produce docility and obedience, showing how psychology is implicated in these conducts that legitimize historical processes of social exclusion and institutional violence, with their truths about the subject. It should be noted that for a worker to talk about CSL, denounce its conditions, etc., it is necessary to find a reliable interlocutor (Figueira & Prado, 2014).

CSL is a social and political category in dispute between different social actors who face power games: journalists, congressmen, agribusiness representatives, academics, human rights activists, jurists, etc. We cannot disregard the existence of a psychic and socio-institutional dynamic, as well as social confrontations, around this classification – “slave” – because, often, recognizing oneself as a “slave” is part of a process of acceptance and/or resistance to a title attributed by governmental authorities (labor inspectors, professionals interested in resocialization, researchers, etc.). Certainly, not saying that you were enslaved does not mean that you do not recognize the sovereign power exerted over you. Refusal can be read as a form of recognition that brings to the fore the resistance of an active subject who chooses to say no. No, I am not what they say I am. Is this not a way of shaking the center of gravity of sovereign power?

It is worth noting that the IAP seeks precisely to set in motion the reflection processes of workers as political subjects and subjects of rights – that is, to contribute to the autonomy of subjects of enslavement and emphasize their political capacity; avoiding corroborating the logic of those assisted as patients of the intervention. It seems to us that the resistance of many workers may lie in their rejection of the framing of an abstract image of slavery and may symbolize saying “no” to the only place that seems to be assigned to them: that of a victim worthy of pity.

Final Considerations

This article addressed the relationship between subjectivity and contemporary slave labor and revealed the workers’ experiences, the characteristics of the scenario of exploitation, violence, and parental abandonment, as well as the tensions surrounding the category of slavery.

Further research is needed on the elements related to the libidinal economy linked to contemporary slavery in Brazil, since our empirical investigation did not provide us with enough material to delve deeper into the topic. At the same time, it would be relevant to carry out further research to understand the relationship between child labor and slave labor. However, this article serves as a micro-historical record of the labor relations and ways of life in 21st century Brazil, in the current scenario of so many attacks on workers’ rights, whose meanders reveal a dynamic of social, political and economic barbarism, in the face of which any silence would be complicity. For this reason, we consider it valuable to have outlined here elements of the narratives of a dramatic reality to minimally deepen the knowledge about the subjective experiences of those who are in a situation of slavery. Further analysis is needed, focusing on the senses and meanings of slave labor from the perspective of the particular contents it assumes in the lives of those who experience it.

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